

# GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTH

## **Livable, Walkable Communities**

### *What is a Livable, Walkable Community*

LWCs are places where people of all ages and abilities can easily enjoy walking, bicycling and other forms of recreation. They are places that support and promote physical activity; have sidewalks, on-street bicycle facilities, multi-use paths and trails, parks, open space and recreational facilities; and promote mixed use development and a connected grid of streets, allowing homes, work, schools and stores to be close together and accessible by walking and bicycling.

### *Rationale:*

New Hampshire prides itself as "one of the healthiest states in the nation"<sup>1</sup> yet there are health statistics trends that remind us that there is still much work to do. New Hampshire mirrors national surveillance statistics, which document that ***1 in 4 adults currently have a sedentary lifestyle with no leisure time physical activity and an additional 1/3 of adults are insufficiently active to achieve health benefits.***<sup>2</sup> ***The health benefits of regular and moderate exercise have been well documented. Walking most days of the week, 30 minutes a day, can prevent heart disease, control body weight, reduce blood pressure, control diabetes, improve one's mental health, and reduce the risks of stroke and osteoporosis.***

Currently, 55% of New Hampshire adults are overweight or obese<sup>3</sup> and obesity is increasing among children with children becoming less active as they move through adolescence. Data indicate that obese children are at increased risk to become obese adults and obesity in adulthood is related to coronary artery disease, hypertension, and diabetes. Heart disease is the leading cause of deaths both nationally and in New Hampshire.<sup>4</sup> To mitigate the risks of developing heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes one of the goals of Healthy NH 2010 advocates *increasing the percentage of persons who engage in physical activity for thirty minutes or more five or more times a week.* Healthy NH 2010 is the statewide disease prevention health promotion agenda for the next decade.

While the need to increase our physical activity becomes more evident, we continue to literally construct barriers to attaining this goal. The built infrastructure is suited more to the ease of the automobile than to the health of humans. Forty percent of all automobile trips made are 2 miles or less. (A brisk 2-mile walk takes 30 minutes!) We fail to build sidewalks that allow children to safely walk to school, elders to safely navigate their community for 30 minutes of aerobic walking and the disabled an opportunity to get out and about in their communities. It is not unusual for seniors to drive to a mall to do their daily walking. Road shoulders are narrow or non-existent discouraging cyclists from riding to work. Current development trends encourage suburban sprawl, eliminates green space, segregates community members and draws sharp lines of demarcation between the places where we live, work, learn and play.

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<sup>1</sup> Healthy NH 2010

<sup>2</sup> Physical Activity and Cardiovascular Health. National Institutes of Health Consensus Statement Online. Dec 18-20, 1995, 13(3): 1-33. <http://text.nlm.nih.gov/nih/cdc/www/101txt.html>

<sup>3</sup> Healthy NH 2010

<sup>4</sup> Healthy NH 2010

The Governor's Office SmartGrowth effort has begun to address this issue. Public health scholars and practitioners have begun to examine and advocate for built environments as an effective means to increase physical activity<sup>5</sup>. There is movement at the national level through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and in other states (New York, California, Washington and North Carolina, for example) to promote Active Community Environments to improve the health and ultimately the quality of life for its citizens. Livable, Walkable Communities (LWC) is another name for Active Community Environments).

***Benefits: Human Health, Community Health, Economic Health, Environmental Health***

Among the many, many benefits of LWC

- Human Health: Increased physical activity, social connections, air quality, aesthetics are all results of LWC environments.
- Community Health: Destination biking and walking and recreational trails provide ways to incorporate activity into everyday life for adults and children, reduce isolation and build personal connections so important to health.
- Environmental Health: Less auto use means cleaner air, more green space, greater appreciation of and possibilities for open space
- Economic Health: Contributes to Main Street revitalization and small business success. Also bike and pedestrian modes of transportation can help alleviate traffic congestion and reduce infrastructure costs.
- Conservation: Cluster development and bike and pedestrian transportation alternatives free land for open space and conservation.
- Seniors, disabled and children: Safe walkways are beneficial to this often non-driving population.

**What is the State Doing to Address this Issue?**

The Governor's Smart Growth effort is addressing sprawl, a main inhibitor to developing LWC. Additionally, many State Departments are addressing pieces of the LWC puzzle. The LWC project is the first to introduce the health aspects of this topic. LWC and Smart Growth are proposed as 2 out the 6 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan issues.:

**What Needs to Be Done?**

The first priority is education. NH citizenry at all levels need to understand the health implications and all benefits of LWC. We need to create a "grass roots" demand for LWC.

Secondly, community leaders need the tools to motivate and move their communities forward in this effort. They need a tool to present the vision, a community toolkit to establish baseline and evaluate success of their community's LWC status, a process to assist them in planning and implementing visible first steps; a resource guide to existing available help and a network for sharing experience and information.

Thirdly, state policies such as those discouraging in-town school building and laws mandating the allowed use for gasoline tax dollars need to be examined.

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<sup>5</sup> How Land Use and Transportation Systems Impact Public Health: Active Community Environments, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/aces.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/aces.htm)

Lastly, one of the most important needs is to bring those organizations, state departments and key stakeholders together to understand each organizations' role, present a unified message and create a coordinated effort to move this concept to reality in New Hampshire.

The LWC project has begun to address the first, second and last of these strategies. The NH Charitable Foundation is presently organizing and financing the strategies around policy. In order to effect change, all parties with a vested interest need to be part of this effort.